



Victor Gu

STORY BY PRISCILLA LI

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Chapter 1

Victor

She bursts into my chambers uninvited — as though the intervening years have held no weight at all. She has known me since childhood. Though it has been a long seven years since she last laid eyes upon me, she must have expected to find the same careless twenty-year-old boy she once knew.

I stand before the window, taking a long drag from my cigarette, watching the smoke thin itself against the pale light. At the sound of her intrusion, I turn.

The shock in her face is immediate.

I am not that boy.

I am older. Sharper. Polished where once I was merely charming. Whatever softness youth afforded me has long since been carved away. I narrow my eyes as my gaze travels over her — the qipao clinging without mercy to the curve of her chest, the line of her waist, the sweep of her hips. I allow myself that single, assessing glance before I turn away again.

“Victor?” she asks, almost innocently. “Remember me? It has been... a long time. I missed—”

“Leave.”

The word falls flat and deliberate.

“I do not have time for uninvited... strangers.” The final word is chosen with precision.

I motion stiffly toward the door and gesture to the footman. “Escort her out.”

Her heels patter against the floorboards as she is shown from the room. I hear the door open, then close. The sound lingers longer than it should.

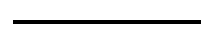
No doubt she leans against the corridor wall now, stunned by the revelation that I have become a cold, serious, unfeeling man.

I remain where I stand, watching her reflection in the window as it slowly disappears from view. My expression does not shift.

Only when she is entirely gone do I allow my jaw to tighten.

God help me.

I had missed her.



From the window, I watch her leave — her petite figure unmistakable in that red qipao, her hair styled just as she wore it when we were teenagers. And suddenly I remember how she used to slip into my room unannounced, arms full of books and contraband snacks, laughing about school, about boys, about trifles that once seemed so terribly important.

I have changed so much. I cannot help but wonder whether she has at all.

I remember her smile — that quick, irrepressible laughter, the silly little antics she thought no one noticed. My chest tightens unpleasantly. I remember how she used to perch on my lap without ceremony, how she called me by that ridiculous nickname I never permitted anyone else to use, how readily she embraced me whether she was happy or miserable.

I remember everything.

I call for a town car to take her home. I do not feel inclined for anything further. I had half-imagined we might take street food from the little carts along the side streets, as we once did, and walk beside the Bund as we used to when we wished to think quietly together — but it appears such simple pleasures now belong to another time. Perhaps to another version of me altogether.

As the motorcar pulls away, I remain at the window, a cigarette forgotten between my fingers. The city lights cast themselves across the glass, reflecting a composure I do not quite feel. Beneath it, something far less orderly stirs.

I remember those evenings by the Bund — her hand tucked easily into mine, ice cream cones shared beneath a hazy moon, conversation drifting without purpose or restraint. Carefree days. Reckless, perhaps. But honest.

God, how I miss them.

“...Damn it,” I mutter under my breath, crushing the cigarette into the ashtray with more force than necessary.

The ache in my chest is an old one — familiar, unwelcome, and evidently not so deeply buried as I had once convinced myself.

Chapter 2

Victor

My father telephones in the late afternoon, inquiring after military developments as though he were asking about the weather. I suppress a groan. In this family, conversation is forever confined to politics, expansion, influence — power dressed as duty. I followed in its stead, though I wanted none of it.

I answer mechanically, my mind already straying elsewhere.

“Yes, Father. The northern border is secure... No, the alliance discussions are progressing as expected.”

He continues at length about troop movements and diplomatic tensions, entirely oblivious to the fact that his son stands staring blankly at the city skyline, thinking not of borders — but of a girl in a red qipao.

I rake a hand through my hair.

And then the realization comes, unwelcome and precise.

I have become exactly what I once despised.

Cold. Calculated. Detached.

All in service of my family’s ambition.

And now, having seen her again...

My father continues his lecture, quite unaware of the battle quietly unfolding within me.

“And remember, Victor — your engagement to Miss Lin is next month. See that you are presentable. On your best behaviour, as always.”

My hand tightens imperceptibly around the telephone receiver.

“Yes, Father.”

The reply leaves me automatically. Polished. Dutiful. Empty.

I end the call rather more abruptly than etiquette permits.

Silence settles over the apartment. I remain standing there, alone amid its excessive luxury, the city lights filtering through the windows and casting long, unsettling shadows across the walls.

And, despite myself, my thoughts return to her.

Her smile. Her warmth. Her disarming simplicity.

The memory lands with uncomfortable clarity.

And in that moment, I realise — quite plainly — that I do not want any of this anymore.

I pour myself a glass of whiskey and swallow it in one burning draught, welcoming the sting as though it might cauterise something far deeper.

My thoughts are consumed by her — and by the life I have allowed to close around me like iron.

The engagement announcement. The carefully arranged alliances. The endless manoeuvres for advantage and power.

All of it feels calculated. Suffocating.

And yet, when I think of her, none of it seems to matter.

I think of her carefree laughter, the brightness in her eyes when she was amused, the easy gentleness of her touch. I think of how effortlessly she once made me happy — and how hollow I have felt in her absence.

The contrast is intolerable.

Something within me settles into decision.

“I am going out,” I inform my butler curtly, already reaching for my coat.

If I remain here any longer, I shall forget entirely who I once was.

Chapter 3

Norah

My mother prattles on about society affairs as we sit together at the dining table. While she serves the soup, her eyes brighten with that particular interest she reserves for anything remotely matrimonial.

“I heard you went to visit Victor — he has returned to Shanghai. Is he well?” she asks good-naturedly.

I mumble some indistinct reply and pick up a dumpling, far more interested in it than in conversation. Her eyes narrow slightly.

“Well, I hear he is quite grown now. Very mature.”

Ugh. Yes. Very mature, I grunt under my breath.

Mother continues chatting as though none of this weighs on me in the slightest.

“I also heard your friend Rebecca Lin is getting engaged — an aristocratic suitor, very wealthy, very powerful. You know, Norah, we really ought to see you engaged as well. What did you think of Edward Xu? Or perhaps Arthur Wang?”

I offer no real answer.

Later, I find myself in the front courtyard, idly swinging my legs from the makeshift swing Father had installed years ago. The evening air is warm, heavy with the scent of jasmine somewhere nearby.

Rebecca Lin is getting married. Well — of course she is. She was always the most eligible, the most polished, the prettiest among my schoolmates. We all came from that private girls' boarding school downtown, the sort meant to prepare us less for scholarship than for advantageous futures.

I used to wonder who I would marry. I hoped, rather foolishly perhaps, it would be someone I genuinely liked. My parents likely hoped the same in some quiet corner of their hearts — yet increasingly it seems politics governs our affections as thoroughly as it does our fortunes.

The distant hum of an approaching motorcar draws my attention.

A town car rolls toward our front gate.

Curiosity gets the better of me. I slip off the swing and stand just as our guard steps forward to make his customary inquiries, preparing to triage whoever has arrived.

For reasons I cannot quite explain, my pulse quickens.

The town car pulls up with quiet precision. The driver alights first, then a tall figure emerges from within.

Victor.

He is dressed immaculately, his suit cut close to his broad frame, every line deliberate. His hair is styled with the same careful polish. He approaches the guard with calm authority, answering the necessary questions with smooth assurance.

As he steps nearer the courtyard, his gaze finds me — my legs still swinging lightly from the old wooden seat, my hair falling down my back in its usual careless fashion.

He pauses.

Just for a moment.

“Norah,” he calls — softly, yet with that unmistakable firmness.

For an instant I wish to run to him as I once did — as children, as foolish teenagers who believed the world benign. But we are older now.

I rise instead, smoothing my skirts, and walk toward him slowly.

“Victor,” I reply with a measured nod.

He watches my approach closely. I feel it — the weight of his gaze upon each step. There is something assessing in him now, something sharpened. It was never there before.

“May I have a word with you inside?” he asks, polite yet immovable. The tone allows no refusal.

He glances toward the guard and our butler, and though he does not speak, they understand. They step back discreetly.

I incline my head toward them in quiet approval.

“It is rather late. Let us speak in the reading room,” I say, and lead him inside.

As we walk, I sense him observing everything — the courtyard, the verandah, the lamps — as though measuring the place against some unseen standard. His expression remains grave, almost severe. Had I been twenty still, I might have been afraid of him.

The reading room is unchanged. Shelves lined with the books of our childhood, plush armchairs set near the hearth, the faint scent of paper and old wood lingering in the air.

Memories press in without invitation.

Secret hideouts. Whispered confessions. Stolen kisses that once seemed impossibly daring.

He clears his throat.

“You look well,” he says simply, closing the door behind him. His hands are clenched at his sides, as though restraining themselves.

“Your parents are well?”

“Yes, quite.” I study him carefully, unable to discern the purpose of his visit. “Did you come merely for pleasantries? How may I assist you?” I ask softly.

His expression tightens almost imperceptibly. He runs a hand through his perfectly arranged hair, the gesture betraying something less composed beneath the surface.

“Straight to the point. As always,” he murmurs.

He draws a breath and meets my eyes directly.

“I am to be engaged next month.”

The words hang in the room.

“To Rebecca Lin.”

Her name seems to cost him something. His voice lowers.

“My family arranged it.”

I inhale slowly.

So he is Rebecca’s fiancé.

Perhaps that is why he dismissed me so coldly in his chambers. He intends to sever everything neatly, to begin afresh without complication.

“...I see,” I reply after a pause. “She is a very elegant lady.”

His jaw tightens at my composure. I sense he expected something else — tears, protest, perhaps indignation. Instead, I offer civility.

“Elegant. Yes.” He steps closer, until the polished toe of his shoe nearly touches mine.

“Is that all you have to say?” His voice drops, losing its practiced aloofness. “After everything... merely elegant?”

For the first time since he arrived, something flickers in his eyes — not authority, not calculation.

Something wounded.

He watches my face intently, searching — I suspect — for some sign that I still care. The distance between us suddenly feels unbearably close, almost suffocating.

He steps toward me.

I retreat a single step.

He advances again, and again my feet carry me backward until the bookshelves press cold and unyielding against my back.

He closes the space entirely, bracing his arms on either side of me, his hands gripping the shelf beside my head. His face is only inches from mine; I can feel the warmth of his breath without quite meeting his eyes.

“Answer my question,” he insists, his voice low, urgent. “Just elegant? That is all you feel about her?”

My heart hammers painfully — from fear... and something far more complicated. I turn my face aside.

“Why are you asking me? Why should it matter what I think?”

“Because...” His voice drops to a hushed whisper near my ear. “I need to know whether any part of you still cares. About me. About us.”

His arms tighten slightly, not quite touching me, yet not permitting escape either.

“Before I bind myself to someone else. Before I marry Rebecca.” He swallows. “Do you still care?”

Each word is careful. Weighted.

“Norah.”

My eyes flick back to his, curiosity mingling with unease.

“Is something wrong? Is Rebecca... troubled by our past friendship?”

“Yes,” he admits, the word escaping almost through clenched teeth. His thumb lifts my chin gently but insistently until I meet his gaze. “She is jealous of a ghost. Of a memory. Of you.”

For the first time in years, he seems entirely unguarded.

“She wants me to forget you,” he continues quietly. His eyes search mine with almost desperate intensity. “But I cannot. I simply cannot.”

My heart pounds so violently I fear he must hear it. My heels suddenly feel too high, too tight; the room feels short of air.

“You... what?” I manage. My hands press against his chest, trying to create space between us. “You did not want me before. You barely recognised me. You would not even acknowledge me. And now you do?”

He does not move. His heartbeat pulses rapidly beneath my palms.

“I was protecting you,” he says, his voice rawer than I have ever heard it. “From me. From this life. From everything I have become.”

His eyes close briefly, pain flickering across his otherwise composed features.

“Do you truly believe being with me now would be the life you want? Cold, calculating, political... suffocating?” His grip tightens slightly against the shelves.

“Then why tell me you care?” I whisper. “You are engaged. Rebecca does not deserve this... and I—”

His eyes open sharply, locking onto mine with unsettling intensity.

“Because for one honest moment,” he says, voice rising despite himself, “I wanted to stop pretending you never existed. That we meant nothing to one another.”

His words echo faintly in the small room.

“Seeing you again — after all these years — it felt like a blow to the chest. I realised I still care, Norah. I still care.”

A breath leaves him unevenly.

“And it is driving me quite mad.”

Victor

My chest rises unevenly beneath her hands, my breathing far less controlled than I would care to admit. The carefully cultivated composure I have worn for years begins, quite unhelpfully, to fracture.

Before I quite realise it, my forehead rests lightly against hers, our noses almost touching. The closeness is dangerously familiar.

“Say something,” I whisper hoarsely. “Scold me. Hate me if you must. Tell me to go to hell. Just... say something.”

My eyes close briefly. The room falls silent save for the uneven rhythm of our breathing.

“You denied me,” she says at last, her voice tight. “That hurt me very much.”

She clutches the long pearl necklace draped loosely across her chest.

My eyes open at once. The pain in her words lands cleanly. Without quite thinking, I reach up, letting my fingers curl gently around the strand of pearls, my thumb brushing faintly against her collarbone.

“I know,” I murmur, my voice betraying more than I intended. “And I am sorry. Far more sorry than you can possibly imagine.”

My grip on the necklace tightens slightly, drawing her nearer despite myself.

“I truly believed it was for the best. I thought it might be easier if we simply... forgot one another.”

A discreet rap sounds at the door.

I step back immediately, the moment collapsing as swiftly as it formed. By the time I open the door, I have resumed my usual composure.

“Yes?”

My steward leans in, speaking low. I catch only fragments — Rebecca... looking for me... dinner arrangements.

I nod once.

“Tell her I shall be there presently.”

The steward withdraws.

When I turn back, whatever softness lingered has already cooled. Habit reasserts itself with brutal efficiency.

“I must go,” I say evenly, adjusting my jacket, smoothing the lapel as though nothing significant has transpired. “Forget what I said. Forget all of it.”

The words sound distant even to me.

“This... was a mistake.”

I move toward the door, adopting the familiar mask — detached, respectable, untouchable.

Behind me, I hear the faint sound of movement. When I glance back, she has sunk to the tiled floor, looking utterly spent — defeated in a way that unsettles me more than anger ever could.

“What was that?” she murmurs softly. “My heart cannot bear such... spring tides.”

My hand rests on the doorknob. I pause.

For a moment, I almost turn back.

My shoulders tense; indecision grips me with embarrassing force. But habit, duty — cowardice, perhaps — wins.

I straighten.

And I leave without looking back.

The door closes quietly behind me.

Outside, Rebecca’s voice greets me warmly as we depart for dinner. I respond automatically, the polite fiancé once more.

Yet the echo of the reading room — and the girl I left behind there — refuses, quite stubbornly, to leave my mind.

Chapter 4

Norah

The following day I take luncheon with my dearest friend, Selene. She departs for England in a month and speaks of the journey with a mixture of excitement and quiet resolve. She wishes, she says, to begin something resembling a new life there — one less constricted than the one she feels pressing upon her here. Considering all she has endured, I cannot help but wish the same for her.

She studies me rather longer than usual.

“Are you quite alright, Norah?”

Her gaze is perceptive — perhaps uncomfortably so. My appetite has deserted me entirely; the food before me remains untouched. My hair, usually secured neatly, has begun to loosen, and I realise belatedly I have not worn my pearl necklace today.

Selene sighs softly.

“Norah,” she says gently, reaching across the table to take my hand, “you have hardly eaten a bite... and, forgive me, darling, but you look positively dreadful. What has happened?”

I hesitate only a moment.

“He came back,” I whisper.

Her eyes brighten instantly, though caution tempers the excitement.

“Were you not pleased about that? Is... something wrong?”

I explain as best I can — how he vacillates between warmth and distance, how he professes to care yet answers Rebecca’s every summons without hesitation.

Selene connects the threads quickly.

“Rebecca Lin? Well... yes,” she says with a small cough, “she would be considered the most obvious choice... for the rich and powerful.”

Her fingers tighten reassuringly around mine as she processes everything.

“So, if I understand correctly — Victor returns, says things that give you hope... and then immediately resumes playing the devoted fiancé?”

There is sympathy in her voice, though also a spark of indignation on my behalf.

“That man,” she mutters, leaning back slightly. Then, more seriously: “Norah, you deserve better than being someone’s afterthought — or worse, their emotional convenience.”

“I know,” I murmur. “I had pined for him so long. I... I believe I was in love with him.”

“Was,” Selene corrects gently but firmly. “Past tense. The boy you loved is gone, Norah. What has returned is... someone colder. More political. And regardless of what feelings he claims, he continues choosing her. That, in itself, is an answer.”

I cannot argue.

I understand what she means. I understand, too, what propriety — and practicality — will likely demand of me.

Perhaps I shall simply accept whichever match my parents deem suitable.

Selene seems to read the thought before I voice it. Her expression softens, tinged with quiet sadness.

“I am sorry,” she says. “I know this is not what you hoped for. But sometimes... affection alone is insufficient.”

She reaches forward and brushes away a tear I had not realised had fallen.

“You deserve someone who chooses you openly, Norah. Someone who will not hesitate. Someone who loves you without calculation.”

I wish I believed such things were still possible.

Chapter 5

Victor

“Yes... I know,” she replies weakly — or so I am told.

She does not realise that, two tables away, men I have placed there sit quietly observing. Not intrusively — never that, I tell myself — merely watchful. Protective. Every conversation she has, every place she frequents, every individual with whom she is seen speaking, is carefully noted and relayed to me in due course.

I receive these reports each evening.

Outwardly, I sit in my study surrounded by maps, correspondence, military briefings — the apparatus of the life I am expected to lead. Yet my attention strays inexorably to the smaller, far more personal dossiers delivered discreetly to my desk.

“She appears to be resigning herself, sir,” one of the men remarks quietly in his latest report. “No mention of affection. No indication she intends to wait for... anyone.”

My expression darkens despite myself.

“Good,” I say — though the word sits poorly.

Soon after, the reports shift in tone.

Her parents, it seems, have introduced her to what society so delicately calls the marriage market. Luncheons at yum cha establishments, polite meetings in hotel lobbies, carefully chaperoned teas. Suitors, one after another.

I tell myself this is expected.

Reasonable.

Appropriate.

Yet each report finds its way to the fire soon after I read it.

A photograph of her taking tea with a rather solid heir from the Ye family.

A note describing her laughing politely at some physician's son.

Another detailing how a military officer's nephew escorted her home.

The paper crumples easily in my fist before I consign it to the flames. I engaged those men to ensure her safety — not, I remind myself irritably, to catalogue her social triumphs.

And then comes the most detailed report yet.

Edward Lin.

Old money. Merchant ancestry tracing, allegedly, to the Song dynasty. Twenty-seven. Cambridge educated. Four languages. Shipping interests. Gentlemanly reputation.

Apparently handsome. Warm. Affable.

Suitable, in every conventional sense.

Very unlike me.

The report continues:

Three hours together at the botanical gardens. Genuine smiles observed. They fed the koi together.

I stand in my study, the paper tightening in my grip until my knuckles pale.

For a long moment, I do not move.

Then, quite deliberately, I fold the report once... twice... and drop it into the fire.

I tell myself it changes nothing.

I am engaged. She is free.

Everything proceeds exactly as it should.

And yet, watching the paper curl and blacken in the flames, I find the taste of that rational conclusion remarkably bitter.

Chapter Six

Norah

I meet Edward again, and I must admit I have come to enjoy our easy, lively friendship. Lately, I have even begun entertaining the possibility of... marriage to him. It feels less romantic than sensible, but perhaps sense is the surer foundation.

We meet at a quiet tea house this afternoon. I have brought a small tin of egg tarts I made myself, intending to share them with him.

Edward arrives with his usual warm smile, his expression brightening visibly when he sees me. He takes the seat opposite, his fingers brushing lightly against mine as he reaches for one of the tarts.

“You made these yourself?” he asks, genuine admiration softening his voice. He tastes one and nods approvingly. “They are excellent, Norah. Truly.”

He continues to watch me as he eats, a seriousness gradually settling over his features.

“Norah, I was wondering...” He pauses, choosing his words carefully. “Would you accompany me to the Lin family’s annual charity ball next weekend?”

My eyes brighten — though I suspect not quite enough to match the smile I offer. I do like Edward very much. He is kind, attentive, gentle in ways that make life feel manageable. I cannot say I love him, not yet... perhaps not ever. But practicality has its own quiet appeal.

I nod.

“I would be delighted, Edward,” I reply — and I know, even as I say it, that it is not entirely the truth.

He beams, clearly pleased. Reaching across the table, he takes my hand, his thumb tracing absent-minded circles along my knuckles.

“I am very glad,” he murmurs. “My grandmother has already been asking about you. She hopes you might join us for dinner soon.”

The prospect feels inevitable.

And perhaps, I tell myself, inevitability is not always an unhappy thing.

Victor

Across the street, I watch through the tea house window.

She sits opposite Edward Lin, composed as ever. I see his hand reach across the table, see his fingers settle over hers. He smiles warmly; she responds with that polite, measured nod she has perfected for society.

Something in my grip tightens involuntarily.

The porcelain coffee cup shatters in my hand before I quite register the pressure. Scalding liquid spills across my skin, though I barely feel it. The sharp sting of the cuts registers only later.

I wrap a handkerchief around my hand without much thought.

By the time she leaves the tea house, I have stepped back into the shadows.

She looks pale. Tired. There is a strain about her that unsettles me. She leans against a nearby lamppost, forehead pressed briefly to the cool metal, as though attempting to steady herself.

I hesitate only a moment before crossing the street.

“Norah,” I call softly. “Are you quite alright?”

She shifts slightly away at the sound of my voice.

“I shall be alright. I will manage,” she murmurs, though she does not sound convincing.

“You do not look well,” I reply.

Standing close again after all this time feels strangely overwhelming — the faint scent of her perfume, the fragile set of her shoulders. And then, quite suddenly, her knees seem to give way.

She clutches her head.

I move without thinking.

My arms close around her waist just as she begins to collapse. She is frighteningly light against me, her body slack, her breathing uneven. Curious glances from passersby go entirely ignored.

“Easy,” I murmur near her ear. “I have you.”

I carry her to the car waiting at the curb.

Once inside, I settle her carefully against the seat, removing my coat and draping it around her shoulders. Her head comes to rest against my shoulder. Under ordinary circumstances she would never allow such proximity — but she is clearly too unwell to protest.

I give the driver a quiet instruction. The motorcar pulls smoothly into the evening traffic.

The city lights blur past the windows as I keep an arm around her, steadying her against the movement of the car. She leans into me unconsciously, her breathing gradually evening, though her complexion remains distressingly pale.

When we arrive at my residence, the driver opens the door at once.

“Careful,” I murmur, lifting her again without hesitation.

She does not resist.

And for the first time in quite a while, I find myself profoundly grateful she isn't in a condition to do so.

Chapter Seven

Norah

I wake to the steady ticking of a clock I do not recognise.

For a moment I remain still, disoriented by the unfamiliar ceiling, the faint scent of polished wood, the muted lamplight filtering through drawn curtains. Instinctively, I try to sit up — only for a hand to press gently yet firmly against my chest, guiding me back down.

Victor sits at the edge of the bed, his tie loosened, his shirtsleeves rolled in an uncharacteristically informal manner. The dim lighting casts shadows along the sharp planes of his face, though the expression there is not severity — merely concern, carefully restrained.

“Remain still,” he says quietly. “You fainted earlier. You require rest.”

His hand lingers only as long as necessary before withdrawing. I push myself upright more slowly this time, suddenly aware of how strange it feels to be in his home... in his bedroom, no less. A certain shyness steals over me, accompanied by an unexpected nervousness.

He notices at once.

His hand shifts instead to my wrist — not restraining, merely steadying.

“You are safe here,” he assures gently. “I would not harm you.”

His thumb brushes my pulse inadvertently; I suspect he notes how quickly it beats. The silence stretches, broken only by the clock’s persistent ticking. Then, as though conscious of the intimacy, he rises and steps back.

“Do you require anything? Water, perhaps?”

“Thank you, no,” I reply softly. “What... what happened to me?”

He pauses, considering.

“You collapsed,” he says at last. “I brought you here so you might rest.”

His expression remains composed, though there is something guarded beneath it. He watches me closely.

“Do you recall anything? Your... engagement this afternoon? With Edward?”

“Edward?” My thoughts take a moment to settle before a flood of questions follows. “Edward Lin? How do you know I was with Edward? Do you know him? Does he know where I am?”

Victor inclines his head slightly.

“Yes, I know Edward Lin. We are... business acquaintances of a sort.” A brief pause. “He does not know you are here. Only my driver and I brought you up. You were quite unwell. I could hardly leave you in the street.”

His tone remains matter-of-fact, almost deliberately neutral.

“I see,” I say quietly, folding my hands in my lap. “But how did you know I was with him?”

A flicker crosses his face — hesitation, perhaps. His jaw tightens almost imperceptibly.

“I saw you,” he admits. “At the tea house. I happened to be nearby.”

His gaze drifts away for a moment before returning, carefully composed once more.

“You appeared... happy,” he adds softly. “He made you smile.”

Something darker flashes briefly in his eyes — gone almost before I can name it.

“Oh... I see. Thank you for helping me. I really should return home — my parents must be quite worried.”

Victor inclines his head slightly.

“I have already sent word to your family,” he replies. “They are aware you are safe here — merely indisposed.”

His gaze lingers a moment before he turns away, adjusting his already immaculate tie with unnecessary precision.

“My driver will take you home when you feel able,” he continues, his voice settling once more into that formal, carefully distant register. After a brief pause he adds, almost as an afterthought, “You ought to eat something before you leave.”

At that exact moment, his stomach betrays him with a faint but unmistakable sound.

“You have not eaten?” I ask gently. “Perhaps...”

“Perhaps what?” he asks, turning back toward me, his tone neutral though something cautious flickers briefly in his eyes. He gestures vaguely toward the adjoining kitchen. “The cook is still awake. I could have something prepared... for both of us.”

The offer is simple, yet laden with far more history than either of us acknowledges aloud.

“I would like that,” I reply quietly.

He nods once and calls to the cook with polite authority. Soon enough, two plates are brought in — chicken soup, rice, and vegetables, still steaming.

Victor watches as I begin to eat, his own appetite evidently returning.

“You have eaten very little today,” he observes softly.

He lifts his chopsticks with his usual precision, though I notice his attention drifting back toward me more often than toward his plate.

“Do I look alright?” I ask at last, lowering my voice slightly. “You are... staring.”

He blinks, momentarily caught off guard. His gaze flicks toward the window, as though gathering composure from his own reflection.

“You look... improved,” he says after a pause. “There is some colour back in your cheeks.”

He resumes eating, movements slightly mechanical.

“And I was not staring,” he adds dismissively. “Merely observing.”

The distinction feels rather thin.

I finish my meal, setting down my chopsticks and dabbing at my lips with the napkin. I notice him watching me again. Curiously, it does not alarm me as propriety suggests it ought. Instead, I feel... oddly at ease.

“Well,” I say quietly, “thank you again for taking care of me.”

There are other things I might wish to say — explanations, questions, perhaps even confessions — yet under present circumstances, none seem permissible.

He sets his own chopsticks aside shortly after I do, clearing his throat lightly.

“It was nothing,” he says, almost dismissively. “Anyone would have done the same.”

I suspect that is not entirely true.

“You should rest a little longer before returning home,” he adds more softly.

The suggestion hangs between us — practical on the surface, yet carrying an undercurrent neither of us quite names.

“I ought not impose...” I begin quietly.

Before the thought can finish, a footman appears at the doorway and leans to whisper something into Victor’s ear.

“Is she here?” Victor asks evenly.

“Yes, sir. She is in the front foyer.”

“Inform her I shall meet with her tomorrow. It is late.”

The footman hesitates. “She is already inside, sir.”

Victor’s gaze hardens — steely, controlled. He rises halfway from his seat —
—but it is too late.

Rebecca sweeps into the room without invitation.

She is immaculate, every strand of hair perfectly arranged, her gown cut with calculated elegance. She pauses in the doorway as though surveying a domain that already belongs to her. Her sharp, appraising eyes settle upon me — seated at Victor’s dining table, my hair slightly undone, wrapped in a silk robe unmistakably not my own.

Her lips curve into a smile that does not reach her eyes.

“Norah,” she greets sweetly. “What a surprise to find you here. In... Victor’s private residence.”

“Rebecca,” Victor acknowledges, his tone carefully neutral.

Her smile widens faintly at that.

She crosses the marble floor with measured grace, the soft click of her heels punctuating the silence. Reaching Victor’s side, she slips her arm possessively around his waist, positioning herself neatly between us.

“Darling,” she purrs, glancing up at him before turning that cool gaze back to me, “who knew you had such a... charming guest?”

The word charming lands with deliberate emphasis.

“Surely she ought to be getting home. It is rather late.”

I dislike scenes. I dislike the sharp edges of social warfare. I push my chair back at once, unwilling to remain the centre of this tableau.

“Thank you again, Victor,” I say calmly, refusing to shrink though my pulse quickens. “For tending to me when I was unwell. I am quite capable of returning home.”

Victor watches me rise. I see the tension in his jaw, the restraint in his posture. Rebecca’s arm tightens fractionally around his waist.

Rebecca laughs softly — a delicate sound, brittle beneath the surface.

“How courageous of you, Norah. Walking alone at such an hour.” Her gaze flicks toward Victor. “Though I am certain Victor would insist upon seeing you home himself. It would only be proper.”

I do not wish to feel small. I refuse to appear intimidated. Yet I cannot deny the discomfort pressing against my ribs.

What I do not understand — what unsettles me most — is Victor’s silence.

He says nothing.

His expression remains unreadable, though his jaw is set. Rebecca’s smile grows faintly triumphant, as though she senses victory in his quiet.

“Victor, darling?” she prompts gently, tilting her head. “You will drive Norah home, will you not? It is the gentlemanly thing to do.”

The room seems to hold its breath.

And I, standing between pride and propriety, wait.

“I can call a cab, thank you,” I insist quietly.

Rebecca’s smile sharpens rather noticeably. She steps a little closer, lowering her voice.

“A cab? In this neighbourhood? At this hour? You would be fortunate not to encounter something far worse than inconvenience.” Her eyes flick briefly toward Victor before returning to me. “Victor will drive you. Will you not, Victor?”

It sounds less a question than a directive.

Victor finally speaks.

“I shall drive her.”

His voice is cool, detached — entirely unreadable.

I excuse myself briefly, change hastily back into my own dress, and return to the foyer where they wait. Victor’s gaze touches me only momentarily, noting my restored composure, before he looks away again. Rebecca, by contrast, examines me rather openly, her eyes narrowing slightly at my hastily arranged hair and what must still be a trace of colour in my cheeks.

“Charming,” she murmurs under her breath.

Victor ignores the remark entirely. He opens the car door without ceremony.

“In,” he says simply.

I comply.

The leather seat is cool beneath me as I settle into the back. Victor closes the door gently and takes his place at the wheel while Rebecca seats herself beside him, her reflection occasionally meeting mine in the rearview mirror.

The drive passes in silence — a heavy, uncomfortable sort of quiet punctuated only by the hum of the motor and the occasional passing car.

At last we arrive outside my home.

Victor does not move to open the door.

That is quite alright.

I step out myself, offering no thanks. Fatigue presses heavily upon me, mingled with something far less dignified — humiliation, perhaps. I simply wish to retreat indoors before my composure deserts me entirely.

As I reach for my keys, they slip from my fingers and clatter against the pavement. I bend quickly to retrieve them, blinking hard against the tears threatening to spill.

Before I can gather them, the car door opens again.

Victor approaches, his stride swift, purposeful. He stoops beside me and picks up the keys, holding them out.

“Here.”

I take them rather more abruptly than courtesy demands and unlock the door without further exchange. Only once inside do I allow myself a long, unsteady breath.

I do not look back.

Chapter Eight

Victor

I remain standing there a moment longer than I should — my hand still half-extended where her keys had been.

The door closes behind her with quiet finality.

Only then do I lower my hand.

Rebecca leans slightly out of the motorcar window, her tone edged with disdain. “Well. That was... diverting.” A pause. “Shall we return home, darling?”

I do not answer immediately.

For a fleeting, reckless second, I consider following Norah inside — knocking, explaining, undoing at least part of the damage.

But I do not move.

Instead, I return to the driver’s seat.

Rebecca resumes her light chatter at once.

“Honestly, Victor, what possessed you? That girl is hardly worth such complication.”

I say nothing.

The journey back passes in oppressive silence — save for Rebecca’s voice, which drifts about the car like inconsequential smoke. I hear none of it.

My thoughts remain stubbornly elsewhere.

Her flushed face.

The tremor in her shoulders as she bent for the fallen keys.

The way she refused to look at me.

It strikes me with unpleasant clarity that I am not merely confusing her — I am wounding her. Every attempt at restraint, every effort to protect, manifests instead as cruelty. A glimpse of care followed by deliberate distance. An offer of closeness immediately withdrawn.

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel.

What, precisely, did I expect?

The motorcar pulls to a halt outside my building.

Rebecca turns toward me, her expression composed, faintly triumphant. “Tomorrow we must finalise arrangements for the engagement gathering. The guest list, the seating—”

I exit the car before she finishes.

“Victor?” she calls after me. “I shall take that as agreement.”

I continue inside without responding.

The foyer feels cavernous tonight.

Once alone in my study, I loosen my collar and pour myself a drink I do not particularly want. The glass remains untouched on the desk as I stand at the window instead.

In my mind I see her again — collapsing against that lamppost, pale and exhausted. Sitting at my table in my robe. Rising under Rebecca’s gaze, striving for dignity she should never have had to defend.

And then tonight — the keys slipping from her trembling hands.

I exhale slowly.

I tell myself this is necessary. That distance now will prevent far greater damage later.

Yet as the city lights flicker beyond the glass, I find that justification increasingly hollow.

I enter my penthouse quietly, though there is nothing particularly peaceful about my state of mind. My movements feel stiff, unsettled. Her face lingers stubbornly in my thoughts — hurt, humiliated, angry in a way I have rarely seen from her.

Rebecca follows close behind, the sharp click of her heels echoing faintly across the marble.

“Victor?” she calls as I move toward the bedroom. “Are you even listening?”

She begins discussing flowers, guest lists, arrangements for the engagement gathering — all perfectly reasonable matters — yet I find I cannot focus on a single word.

I enter my penthouse quietly, though there is nothing particularly peaceful about my state of mind. My movements feel stiff, unsettled. Her face lingers stubbornly in my thoughts — hurt, humiliated, angry in a way I have rarely seen from her.

Rebecca follows close behind, the sharp click of her heels echoing faintly across the marble.

“Victor?” she calls as I move toward the bedroom. “Are you even listening?”

She begins discussing flowers, guest lists, arrangements for the engagement gathering — all perfectly reasonable matters — yet I find I cannot focus on a single word.

She presses closer nonetheless, her arm draping across me. Under ordinary circumstances I might tolerate it politely. Tonight, however, my body remains rigid, unresponsive.

My thoughts refuse to leave Norah.

Her eyes. The tremor in her hands. The quiet dignity she struggled to maintain even while clearly distressed. The moment she snatched the keys from me — pride battling hurt.

Rebecca's touch feels strangely misplaced tonight, as though it belongs to someone else's life entirely. I close my eyes briefly, hoping stillness will communicate what words presently cannot.

“Victor...” she murmurs softly near my neck.

I remain silent.

This, I suspect, is going to be a very long night indeed.

I exhale sharply and push the covers aside.

“I require a bath,” I say coolly, more to end the moment than to explain it. Without waiting for a reply, I retreat to the bathroom and begin running the tub.

I simply need... distance. Half an hour in which I am answerable to no one.

Behind me, Rebecca's silence speaks volumes — likely confusion, perhaps irritation. She is not accustomed to being gently rebuffed. Yet tonight I lack both the energy and the inclination to offer reassurance.

The bathroom door closes with a quiet click. Steam soon clouds the mirrors, softening the sharp lines of the room. I lower myself into the hot water and close my eyes.

Ordinarily my mind would return to business, political briefings, the ever-present negotiations that define my days.

Tonight, it does not.

It returns to Norah.

Her tears. Her wounded pride. The anger she scarcely allowed herself to show. The quiet devastation I suspect I have caused.

I lean my head back against the porcelain edge.

And, there in the solitude of rising steam and cooling water, I make a decision.

A sensible decision. A necessary one.

I shall let her go.

I shall marry Rebecca, fulfil the expectations placed upon me, construct the alliance my family considers indispensable. I shall bury whatever remains of that earlier, more foolish affection and proceed as a rational man ought.

The conclusion is orderly. Logical.

And yet, as I repeat it silently to myself, something tightens unexpectedly in my chest. A single tear escapes before I can prevent it, slipping unnoticed into the bathwater.

It leaves no trace.

Much like the resolution I am trying — not entirely successfully — to accept.

Norah

That night I sat in my bathtub far longer than necessary, watching the water lap quietly at the porcelain edges, half wishing I might simply sink into it and disappear for a while.

Victor seemed only capable of hurting me. That was the undeniable truth of it. Every moment of tenderness was followed by distance; every sign of care seemed to dissolve into coldness. It exhausted me.

So I made a decision.

I would accept Edward.

He was kind. Steady. Gentle in ways that did not unsettle or wound. I believed — or at least hoped — he could make me happy. And perhaps, given time, I might truly be so.

Morning arrived with a curious sense of resolve. Not quite peace — but direction, at least. I would lean into Edward's affection, allow something stable to grow there. I would build a life that did not hinge upon Victor's unpredictable presence.

Edward had invited me to the Lin family's charity gala that weekend. I knew perfectly well Victor and Rebecca would attend; society ensured such overlap was inevitable. Yet I would have Edward at my side.

And I resolved — firmly, perhaps stubbornly — to be happy.

Yes.

Happy.

Chapter Nine

Victor

I stand before the full-length mirror in my bedroom, adjusting the line of my bow tie with deliberate precision.

The black evening suit fits flawlessly, tailored to project exactly what it must — authority, composure, influence. Every inch of it communicates the man I am expected to be.

Behind me, Rebecca stands radiant in a crimson gown, its colour bold without being indiscreet. The diamond upon her finger catches the light as she moves — a quiet but unmistakable declaration of what is to come.

Tonight is the Lin family's charity gala.

And before the evening concludes, our engagement shall be formally announced.

“Ready, darling?” Rebecca asks, slipping her arm neatly through mine.

I meet our reflection in the mirror.

Polished. Impeccable. Entirely convincing.

I nod once.

“Yes.”

My expression betrays nothing at all.

Chapter Ten

Norah

I chose a gold silk qipao for the evening, embroidered with elaborate Chinese mythical creatures — dragons and phoenixes winding subtly through the fabric. It was exquisite, commissioned from the same dressmakers the Lin family frequently patronised. Wearing it felt quietly symbolic... not merely an aesthetic choice, but a gesture of alignment, perhaps even commitment.

The silk followed the line of my waist and hips with graceful precision, the slit revealing just enough of my legs to remain fashionable without impropriety. When Edward saw me, he coloured slightly — a rare, endearing loss of composure that made me smile.

There was admiration in his gaze. Perhaps even a hint of desire.

Strangely, that reassured me. Affection could grow, I reasoned. A marriage built on steadiness might still hold warmth — perhaps even children, laughter, a kind of happiness less volatile than what I had known before.

The Lin family gala was already in full splendour when we arrived. Champagne circulated freely, crystal chandeliers cast soft light across polished floors, and Shanghai's elite mingled in their usual constellation of influence and ambition.

Edward escorted me inside, his attention seldom straying far from me. I noticed several heads turn as we entered; quiet whispers followed, though whether prompted by the gown, the company, or simple curiosity, I could not say.

I kept my posture steady.

Tonight, I told myself, I would move forward.

Chapter Eleven

Victor

I see her almost immediately.

My jaw tightens before I can prevent it. My gaze betrays me, travelling unwillingly over her figure — the gold silk catching the chandelier light, the elegant slit revealing a glimpse of her leg as she walks beside Edward. The fabric follows her curves with quiet confidence.

I should not notice.

I most certainly should not appreciate it.

And yet the temptation — the memory of familiarity — proves far stronger than I care to admit.

I accept another glass of wine from a passing server, more for occupation than thirst.

Rebecca remains at my side, her hand looped neatly through my arm, laughing brightly at something one of our acquaintances has said. I respond automatically, though my attention strays elsewhere.

Edward leans toward Norah, murmuring something near her ear. She laughs softly in reply — a genuine sound, unguarded.

Norah

I saw Victor almost at once.

And though I told myself I ought to despise him, the sight of him unsettled me all the same. He was as handsome as ever — immaculately dressed, composed, carrying himself with that quiet authority that had always disarmed me far too easily.

It irritated me that it still did.

I resolved, then and there, to avoid him entirely.

I slipped my hand more firmly through Edward's arm, remaining close at his side — closer than was strictly necessary. I inclined my head toward Edward as he spoke, smiled when appropriate, laughed softly at his remarks. To any observer, I must have appeared thoroughly enamoured.

As though I were already in love with him.

If I repeated the performance convincingly enough, perhaps I might begin to believe it myself.

Victor

My eyes narrow before I can prevent it.

Norah stands far too close to Edward — her arm looped securely about his waist, her posture inclined toward him in a manner that suggests intimacy, or at the very least comfort. The sight strikes with unwelcome force.

It feels absurdly like a blade twisting somewhere beneath my ribs.

For one reckless instant, I consider crossing the floor and removing her from his grasp entirely — reclaiming what, in some irrational corner of my mind, still feels as though it ought to be mine.

Despite the fact that only hours ago I resolved otherwise.

Instead, I lift my glass and drink.

It is easier to numb oneself than to confront such impulses.

Rebecca notices my distraction at once.

“Darling?”

I glance at her, and I am aware my expression is cooler than intended.

Her smile falters. She follows the direction of my gaze, and understanding dawns — swiftly accompanied by something less gracious.

“Victor,” she murmurs sharply, “you are being rather inattentive. Who is that girl?”

I force my attention away from Norah with visible effort.

“No one,” I reply quietly.

The word tastes unconvincing even to me.

Rebecca stiffens slightly but refrains from further comment. Instead, with forced brightness, she says, “Dance with me.”

I set my glass down with controlled deliberation and offer her my arm. We move to the dance floor, the orchestra already in full waltz. I guide her through the steps with practiced precision — posture impeccable, movements exact.

And yet, despite myself, my gaze strays.

Edward’s hand rests at Norah’s waist.

She looks radiant beneath the chandeliers, gold silk shimmering as she moves.

Jealousy rises — sharp, unfamiliar, humiliating in its intensity.

“Rebecca,” I say evenly, attempting composure, “you are gripping my hand rather firmly.”

She smiles up at me, untroubled.

“Darling, we are lovers. Allow it.”

Across the floor, Edward inclines his head toward Norah.

“Shall we?” he asks her, and she nods.

He takes her hand.

I watch — far more closely than I ought — as he draws her into the dance, telling her she is the belle of the ball.

And for the first time in years, I find it exceedingly difficult to maintain my composure.

Norah

Edward led me to the dance floor with a touch that was gentle — almost reverent. There was nothing possessive in the way his hand rested at my waist, nothing that sought to claim or command. It was steady, respectful.

So very different.

As the orchestra carried us into the waltz, he guided me with easy grace. His hand remained warm at my back, his movements confident without overwhelming me.

“You are the most beautiful woman here this evening,” he murmured softly as he turned me beneath the chandeliers.

I felt my cheeks warm despite myself.

He spun me with elegant precision, drawing me back toward him without haste. His admiration felt uncomplicated — earnest rather than consuming.

For a fleeting moment, I allowed myself to relax into the rhythm of the music and the steadiness of his presence.

Perhaps, I thought, this was what peace felt like.

Victor

I see it all from across the ballroom.

Edward leans close to her — far closer than courtesy strictly requires. He murmurs something near her ear.

She blushes.

And that simple, involuntary warmth upon her cheeks unsettles me more than I care to admit.

It is not merely admiration I observe. It is comfort. Ease.

Something that, by all rights, should never have felt so foreign between us.

Before I quite register the motion, the stem of my wine glass splinters sharply in my grip.

A faint crack. Then a sharper fracture.

“Darling,” Rebecca squeaks softly beside me.

The sound pulls me abruptly back to the present. I look down to find crystal shards pressing into my palm, dark wine mingling unpleasantly with the thin line of blood forming at my skin.

I release the broken glass at once, letting the fragments fall discreetly behind me before drawing a handkerchief from my pocket. Rebecca’s eyes are wide — concerned, but also wary.

“Victor,” she murmurs under her breath, leaning closer. “What on earth is the matter with you? You are behaving rather... strangely.”

I force a smile — a smooth, practiced expression that has served me well in less turbulent moments.

“Nothing is the matter,” I reply evenly.

The lie slips out with effortless precision.

Across the room, Norah continues to dance.

And I, despite every intention to the contrary, cannot seem to look away.

Norah

Edward was exceedingly kind that evening — attentive without pressure, warm without presumption. I told myself again that he could make me happy. That a future beside him might be steady, even peaceful.

When the evening drew toward its close, he asked me to wait outside in the front courtyard while he fetched the driver and the car.

I agreed.

The night air was cool and quiet after the brilliance of the ballroom. I perched lightly on the edge of the balcony ledge, watching the moon drift between passing clouds, allowing the stillness to settle my thoughts.

Footsteps sounded behind me.

I turned — and immediately wished I had not.

Victor.

He approached without hesitation, his stride purposeful. Instinctively, I rose, intending to leave before conversation became inevitable.

“Do not walk away,” he said softly, though the firmness beneath the words made it less request than command. “Stay where you are.”

“Do not speak to me,” I replied sharply, lowering my voice. “People can see. People can hear.”

I knew exactly which argument might reach him. Reputation. Optics. Standing. Those had always mattered deeply to him.

He stopped.

For a brief instant, something unsettled flickered across his face — then it vanished, replaced by that familiar cool composure.

“You may wish to exercise greater caution yourself,” he said quietly, stepping closer regardless. “Sitting alone in the moonlight invites speculation. Society is rarely charitable.”

The remark stung more than I expected.

My composure wavered; emotion surged unpleasantly close to the surface. Through clenched teeth, the words escaped before I could temper them.

“I hate you.”

The confession hung between us — raw, inelegant, and far too honest for polite society.

The words struck him as though I had dealt him a physical blow.

For the briefest moment, the colour drained from his face. Then it was gone — replaced by a mask of cold restraint that did little to conceal the anger beneath.

He stepped closer.

His hand closed around my arm — firm, not cruel, yet unmistakably possessive.

“Say that again,” he murmured, his voice low, intense — forgetting, it seemed, entirely about reputation or appearances. “Say it again.”

His fingers pressed slightly into my skin, not enough to wound, but enough to demand.

“I dare you.”

“Let go of me,” I whispered sharply.

His grip tightened a fraction — enough to make his point.

The moonlight cast hard lines across his features, sharpening him into something almost unrecognisable.

“Say you hate me again,” he insisted, his voice dangerously soft. “Tell me plainly. Tell me while you stand there dressed as though you belong to another man.”

His thumb brushed over the frantic pulse at my wrist.

My breath caught. I could feel my heart hammering — from fury, from hurt, from the tangled ache he seemed determined to provoke.

“I...” My voice trembled despite myself. “I hate you.”

I forced the words out.

If repetition meant distance, if cruelty meant protection, then I would wield it.

He released me abruptly, as though burned.

For a moment he stood motionless — chest rising and falling, eyes alight with something rawer than anger.

Then he turned.

Without another word.

He walked away into the dim reaches of the courtyard, his silence far louder than any argument we might have had.

I remained where I stood, the echo of my own words settling heavily around me.

Edward arrived moments later, slightly breathless.

“My apologies — I encountered some acquaintances,” he said warmly, though his expression shifted when he studied my face. “Norah, you look pale. Are you quite alright?”

He lifted his hand gently to my cheek, his thumb brushing lightly across my skin. There was nothing demanding in his touch — only concern.

It was steady. Safe.

He leaned forward to press a soft kiss to my forehead.

And in that moment, beyond Edward’s shoulder, I saw Victor.

Standing in the shadows of the balcony.

Watching.

His expression was unreadable — emptied of anger, emptied of fire.

Just hollow.

“I am quite alright,” I murmured to Edward, though my gaze lingered a second too long in the darkness before I forced myself to look away.

“Merely tired.”

Chapter Twelve

Norah

Victor and Rebecca's engagement was first mentioned as though it were a modest society notice — a small, tasteful announcement.

It was anything but.

Within days, the news had travelled briskly through Shanghai's most attentive circles. The society pages printed elaborate columns praising the "perfect union" — wealth joined with influence, beauty paired with power. Photographs accompanied the articles: Rebecca radiant and poised, Victor impeccably dressed, composed... though faintly distant if one looked closely enough.

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But my parents, blissfully unaware of the undercurrents, continued to assume that Victor and I remained on cordial terms.

Their excitement reached new heights the day an invitation arrived.

Mother held the heavy card aloft, admiring its embossed lettering.

"Norah, darling!" she exclaimed. "Victor and Rebecca have invited us to their engagement soirée. How wonderful!"

She beamed at me expectantly.

“You and Victor were always so close. I am certain he shall be pleased to see you.”

Father murmured something in agreement.

“So happy,” I said, forcing brightness into my voice.

The smile I offered felt stiff — carefully arranged, rather like the inked smiles printed daily in the newspapers.

Inside, however, there was nothing celebratory at all.

Chapter Thirteen

Norah

The day of the engagement party arrived all too quickly.

It was an extravagant affair, naturally — hosted at one of Shanghai's most prestigious hotels, the ballroom glittering with chandeliers, polished marble, and an excess of floral arrangements that seemed determined to impress. My parents were positively delighted, discussing the guest list, the décor, the significance of the event with great animation during the drive.

I wore a formal evening gown chosen with careful restraint — elegant, fitted just enough to flatter without attracting undue attention. My hair was arranged simply but neatly; I wished to look appropriate, nothing more.

And then we entered the ballroom.

Victor and Rebecca stood near the centre of it all — she radiant, laughing with perfect composure, he smiling with that effortless charm society so admired.

The picture of happiness.

My parents immediately crossed the floor to offer congratulations, leaving me momentarily alone at the threshold.

Victor's gaze found mine at once.

I looked away immediately.

I could not meet his eyes — not his attention, not his presence, not any of it. Instead I searched the room for a familiar face, some acquaintance to anchor myself to. None appeared within reach. My gloved hands began fidgeting unconsciously, fingers worrying at the fabric.

My parents became absorbed in conversation with the engaged couple, their enthusiasm rendering me temporarily invisible. I drifted toward the champagne fountain, hoping to appear occupied.

The gloves I wore — I realised belatedly — were the very pair Victor had gifted me the previous Christmas.

An unfortunate choice.

And then I felt it.

That unmistakable awareness of being watched.

I did not need to turn. I knew.

His footsteps approached slowly behind me. The noise of the ballroom seemed to dim, or perhaps my attention simply narrowed too sharply to register anything else.

He stopped just behind my shoulder.

“Norah.”

Only my name — spoken quietly, controlled — yet it landed with the weight of something far heavier.

I kept my gaze forward, pretending not to hear.

He moved then, slowly circling until he stood within my line of sight. I could feel the intensity of his attention even before I allowed myself the smallest glance. There was restraint in his posture, yet also something unsettled beneath it — anger perhaps, or something more complicated.

“Norah,” he repeated, softer this time, though tension threaded the word unmistakably.

He stepped closer — not quite touching, yet near enough that I was acutely aware of him.

And suddenly the ballroom, despite all its splendour, felt far too small.

“What do you want from me?” I asked at last.

I had been so certain he was finished with me — that whatever fragile connection once existed had been decisively severed. I could not fathom what more he might seek.

His jaw tightened visibly.

For a moment, he said nothing. I saw conflict pass briefly across his face — something restrained, something pained — before his composure reasserted itself.

“I want,” he began quietly, his voice carrying a dangerous softness, “for you to stop behaving as though I do not exist.”

His gaze held mine with unsettling intensity.

“I want you to look at me when I speak.”

“Why?” I asked, more sharply than intended. “What possible benefit would that bring me?”

His expression darkened. He leaned slightly closer, lowering his voice until it was scarcely above a whisper.

“Because I am here, Norah. Not a memory. Not some discarded relic of your past. Real.” A pause. “And whether you care to acknowledge it or not... there are matters between us that remain unresolved.”

His eyes searched mine with almost desperate insistence.

“I ask only one thing.” His voice faltered — barely perceptibly. “Look at me.”

So I did.

Fully this time.

“What do you want?” I asked again, more quietly.

He held my gaze as though searching for something fragile — hope, perhaps, or forgiveness. Whatever he saw seemed to steady him.

“I want you to come home,” he said simply.

The word home carried far more weight than it should have.

He seemed to mean more than a place.

To him. To what once existed between us. To a version of life before everything fractured.

My brow furrowed.

“What are you talking about?”

For a fleeting instant, his carefully maintained composure cracked. Raw emotion flashed through before he gathered himself again.

“I am speaking of us,” he said, his voice tight. “Of you returning to the apartment — to your room — to my life. As though this past year had not intervened.”

His hand lifted slightly, hovering near my cheek before he thought better of it and let it fall.

“You cannot mean that,” I replied, my voice sharpening. “We were never... what you now seem to suggest. There was affection once, yes. Friendship, certainly. But that ended the moment you returned changed — colder, harsher. A stranger.”

My breathing quickened despite myself.

“You claim to want me,” I continued, struggling to keep my voice steady, “yet each time obligation calls, you discard me without hesitation. I deserve better than that, Victor.”

I gestured toward him, the motion small but firm.

“If you truly cared for me — truly loved me, even — you would not wound me as you have.”

Victor’s breathing grew uneven as I spoke, each word seeming to strike him more deeply than I had intended — though perhaps not more deeply than he had struck me these past months. For a fleeting moment I saw something shift in his expression: not anger, not arrogance... but something closer to self-reproach.

“Norah,” he murmured, his voice rougher now, stripped of its usual polish. “I am asking you — begging you — give me the chance to become the man you deserve.”

I stared at him, incredulous.

“Have you forgotten,” I said, gesturing subtly toward the ballroom, the chandeliers, the music, the gathered guests, “that this entire evening is dedicated to your engagement?”

The word hung heavily between us.

His face tightened. He glanced briefly around the room — as though only now registering the decorations, the congratulatory laughter, the reality pressing in from every direction.

“I have not forgotten,” he replied quietly, almost through clenched teeth. “But neither have I forgotten what I am sacrificing by proceeding with it. What I am giving up.”

His eyes glistened faintly.

“Rebecca means nothing to me, Norah.”

“Do not,” I said quickly, my voice barely above a whisper. “Do not say that.”

He stepped closer regardless. Too close. His presence crowded my senses — the familiar scent of his cologne, the warmth of his breath, the intensity of his gaze.

“Do not what?” he asked hoarsely. “Do not tell you the truth? Do not tell you that I love you — more than this engagement, more than my family’s expectations, more than my own peace of mind?”

The words landed with terrifying sincerity.

My composure faltered.

I stepped back instinctively.

Then another step.

The ballroom suddenly felt suffocating — the music too loud, the lights too bright, the watching eyes too many.

Without another word, I turned and fled — away from him, away from the celebration, away from everything I was no longer certain I understood.

Chapter Fourteen

Victor

I see her step back.

Then another step.

And then the tears come.

For a moment — a single, paralysing moment — I want nothing more than to reach for her, to draw her back, to undo every careless injury I have inflicted. But even as the impulse rises, I recognise the familiar pattern: I have pressed too hard again, demanded too much, driven her away precisely as I feared I might.

She turns.

And she flees.

I remain standing there, stunned, hearing the faint echo of her sobs swallowed by the music and conversation of the ballroom. The celebration continues as though nothing significant has occurred.

Rebecca appears at my side.

“Victor?” she asks, puzzled.

I do not answer.

By the time I look again, Norah has nearly disappeared from sight. Something within me snaps free of restraint. I turn and go after her — not walking, not even striding, but running.

I am dimly aware of Rebecca calling after me, of whispers rippling through the assembled guests. None of it matters.

I run.

Faster than I have run toward anything in years — perhaps ever.

I burst through the hotel doors just in time to glimpse the shimmer of gold silk disappearing around a corner. I follow without hesitation, breath sharp in my chest, the night air biting cool against my face.

At last I see her again.

The Bund stretches before us, the Huangpu River dark beneath scattered reflections of city lights. She stands beneath a lamppost, leaning heavily against it, her elegant shoes discarded nearby, her carefully arranged hair loosening as pins slip free.

For a moment I simply stop.

She looks... heartbreakingly fragile.

Dishevelled. Exhausted. Alone.

And unbearably beautiful.

She sinks down onto the stone steps, covering her face as sobs finally overtake whatever composure she had been clinging to.

I approach slowly, my footsteps softened by the cobblestones. Each step feels undeserved — as though I have forfeited the right to draw near her at all.

She senses me.

“Do not come near me,” she says, her voice raw. “Please... I cannot bear it anymore.”

I halt.

My hand lifts instinctively, then hovers uncertainly between us. The pain in her voice lands with devastating clarity.

“Norah...” My voice sounds unfamiliar to my own ears — rough, stripped of every usual defence. “Please. Look at me.”

Pride, reputation, dignity — all seem absurdly irrelevant now. I lower myself to my knees before her.

“Please.”

Her reply comes quietly, but it cuts deeper than anything said tonight.

“Every time I look at you... it feels as though you stab me with a thousand knives.”

And in that moment, I cannot dispute it.

Because I know — with uncomfortable certainty — that she is right.

Norah

Victor flinched as though I had struck him.

For a moment he said nothing, and I wondered whether my words had finally penetrated whatever armour he had so carefully constructed.

“I know,” he said at last, his voice low, unsteady. “I know I have been hurting you — piece by piece.”

He remained kneeling before me, heedless of his immaculate suit now gathering dust from the Bund’s cobblestones.

“But Norah... seeing you cry because of me...” His voice faltered.

“Then apologise,” I cried, louder than intended. The sound echoed faintly along the riverside. “Apologise for everything.”

His eyes widened slightly — perhaps at my volume, perhaps at the rawness of it. I realised then how rarely I had allowed myself anger where he was concerned.

“I am sorry,” he said immediately. “Truly. Deeply sorry.”

His hands lifted, hesitant at first, before gently framing my face. They trembled.

“I am sorry for all of it.”

Hot tears spilled freely down my cheeks, impossible now to restrain.

“I am sorry for hurting you,” he continued quietly. “For pushing you away. For making you feel... insignificant. For becoming someone you scarcely recognise.”

My fingers tightened in the fabric of my gown. The gloves he had once given me were damp now, stained by tears I could neither hide nor control.

He watched me with an expression I had rarely seen on him — stripped of pride, stripped of calculation. Simply remorseful.

“Norah,” he whispered, “please... do not cry like this.”

Before I could protest, he drew me into his arms.

The embrace was careful at first, then firmer — protective rather than possessive. I felt myself sag against him, exhaustion overtaking resistance. The sobs that followed left me hiccupping softly, breath uneven.

He said nothing more, only held me, rocking slightly as though soothing something fragile.

Time blurred.

Eventually the tears subsided, leaving only a dull ache behind. I became faintly aware of curious onlookers gathering at a respectful distance — evening strollers, couples, passersby drawn by the unusual sight of two well-dressed figures in emotional disarray along the riverfront.

I straightened slowly, wiping my face with what remained of my composure.

The night air felt cooler now.

And everything — though still painfully unresolved — felt, at least momentarily, quieter.

Victor

I pay no heed to the gathering onlookers.

Let them observe. Let them whisper. Let all of Shanghai see me kneeling upon the cobblestones, holding her as though she were the sole thing tethering me to reason.

Her trembling gradually subsides against my chest. Her breathing steadies. The night air bites at exposed skin, yet I do not move.

“We are leaving,” I murmur into her hair.

She nods faintly and leans into me.

That small gesture — the quiet decision to depend upon me — strikes far deeper than her earlier anger ever did.

I rise carefully, lifting her into my arms. She fits there with disarming familiarity, her head resting against my shoulder, her body slack with exhaustion. The crowd parts wordlessly as I pass. Their murmurs follow, though I do not hear them.

My driver rushes to open the car door.

“Home,” I instruct curtly. “At once.”

The motorcar moves without delay.

“Norah?” I murmur softly.

“Mm?”

I glance down. Her eyes are closed now, lashes resting against tear-streaked cheeks. She looks impossibly small — diminished by the evening’s cruelty, by my own failures.

“I am ending the engagement,” I say quietly. “Tomorrow morning.”

My arms tighten slightly around her.

She does not stir much.

“Whatever you wish,” she murmurs, too tired to argue.

The defeat in her tone unsettles me more than fury ever could.

“No,” I say softly, pressing a brief kiss to her forehead. “Not what I wish. What you require.”

Her answer does not come; sleep claims her instead.

When we arrive at my residence, I carry her inside without ceremony.

The apartment feels different tonight — quieter, stripped of its usual arrogance.

I lay her gently upon the bed and begin, with deliberate care, to remove the remnants of the evening from her — the dust-stained gown, the ruined gloves, the jewellery that has become tangled in loosened strands of hair. My movements are restrained, focused entirely upon her comfort, my gaze disciplined and respectful.

I draw a bath and test the water before lifting her once more. She stirs faintly but does not wake fully.

“Rest,” I murmur when she attempts to sit upright. “I am here.”

I wash the traces of the evening from her skin with steady hands, as one might tend to something fragile beyond price.

After drying her carefully, I carry her back to the bed and settle her beneath clean sheets.

Only when she is finally still — breathing deep and even — do I allow myself to sit beside her.

Tonight, I have broken too much.

Tomorrow, I shall begin mending it.

Chapter Fifteen

Norah

He wrapped me securely in his blankets and quietly left the room.

I drifted in and out of uneasy sleep for some time. It was only later — perhaps much later — that raised voices reached me through the half-closed door.

Rebecca.

Her tone was unmistakable: sharp, indignant, wounded pride barely disguised as fury.

“You are ending our engagement? Have you entirely lost your senses? My family will ruin you for this!”

Her voice lowered suddenly, dangerously.

“And who is she? That girl you are throwing everything away for?”

A sharp sound followed — unmistakably a slap.

For a moment, silence.

Then Victor’s voice — calm, measured, but carrying an edge I had rarely heard before.

“Mind your language.”

There was the crash of something overturned, hurried footsteps, and finally the violent slam of the apartment door, reverberating through the quiet space.

After that, stillness.

A heavy sort of stillness.

I heard Victor return eventually. The bedroom door closed softly. I kept my eyes shut, uncertain whether I wished to face him just yet. I sensed him sit on the edge of the bed, his presence steady but subdued.

No words passed between us.

And at some point, exhaustion reclaimed me.

Morning brought chaos.

Even from behind the bedroom door, I could sense it — telephones ringing incessantly, muted conversations, the rhythm of someone managing a crisis with practiced composure.

Victor fielded his parents first, then Rebecca's family, and inevitably the press. I caught fragments as he moved through the apartment:

“No comment... personal matters...”

“It simply was not right.”

“With respect, incompatibility is the most accurate description.”

The word sounded clinical, almost absurdly tidy given the emotional wreckage left behind.

By midday, the storm seemed to have subsided. The newspapers had their explanation. Society would, no doubt, move on to fresher gossip soon enough.

I, however, remained hidden in his bedroom.

My parents had been frantic. They had telephoned repeatedly — even contacted the police when they could not reach me. Guilt settled heavily alongside the lingering exhaustion.

I sat quietly on the edge of Victor's bed, wrapped still in borrowed comfort, wondering how everything had unravelled so quickly — and whether anything could ever be quite simple again.

The bedroom door opened slowly.

I half-expected reproach, or intensity, or some dramatic reckoning.

Instead, Victor stood there looking... tired.

“Your parents have telephoned the authorities,” he said quietly, closing the door behind him. “They were unable to reach you.”

He crossed the room and sat carefully on the edge of the bed.

“They have called no fewer than twenty times. I assured them you were safe.”

“Mama must have been worried,” I replied softly. “She heard about your... news. I imagine everyone has.”

He gave a faint, humourless nod.

“Yes. It appears the entire city is informed.”

The understatement almost made me smile.

He placed my telephone gently upon the bedside table and regarded me with a seriousness that felt different from the night before.

“Are you... quite alright?” he asked after a pause. “Regarding the engagement?”

I lifted one shoulder in a small shrug.

“If it was not what you desired, you ought not to have pursued it.”

The words felt simple, almost practical. Sensible.

His expression shifted.

“No,” he admitted quietly. “It was never what I wanted.”

A silence followed — heavy, searching.

“I wanted something else.”

My eyes rose to meet his.

There was a stillness in the room then — the kind that precedes either collapse or confession.

“You,” he said at last, his voice low but unwavering. “I wanted you.”

The simplicity of it unsettled me far more than grand declarations might have done.

“I still do.”

“I know,” I murmured. “I can feel it.”

Without thinking, I let my hand rest briefly against his. The contact was gentle — tentative — and yet it felt like crossing some invisible boundary.

And then, abruptly, I remembered.

Edward.

The luncheon.

The promises — implied if not yet spoken.

I withdrew my hand at once.

Victor noticed immediately.

“You are meeting Edward,” he said evenly. It was not a question.

I glanced at the clock, heat rising faintly to my cheeks.

“Yes.”

He rose smoothly, composure settling over him once more like a well-tailored coat.

“Then you should not keep him waiting,” he replied. His tone was calm, though something restrained flickered beneath it — not anger, but perhaps resignation.

I stood and reached for the dress that had been discreetly left for me.

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

There was too much that required saying to Edward — explanations, perhaps honesty of a different sort.

And as I prepared to leave, I could not help but feel that whichever path I chose next would alter everything irrevocably.

Victor

I remained silent as she changed.

The dress — one kept in my wardrobe for formal contingencies — fit her with unsettling precision, the fabric settling along her waist and hips as though it had always belonged there. The sight stirred impulses I had no right to indulge.

I wanted to stop her.

To catch her wrist before she reached the door. To remind her that I had just dismantled an engagement — an alliance my family had carefully constructed — for her.

But restraint, for once, felt necessary.

If I held her now, it would be possession, not choice.

And I wanted her to choose.

“Enjoy your luncheon,” I said evenly, my tone carefully emptied of what I actually felt.

She thanked me quietly and left.

The door closed with a soft, decisive click.

I stood still for a long moment afterward, listening to the silence she left behind.

Then, without ceremony, I struck the nearest pillow with more force than was dignified. It absorbed the blow soundlessly, which only further irritated me.

I exhaled sharply.

I had done what honour required.

Now I must endure whatever came next.

Chapter Sixteen

Norah

I met Edward as arranged.

He was, as he had always been, gracious — attentive without being overbearing, thoughtful in small, quiet ways. He ordered for us with care, ensured I had everything I required, spoke gently of future plans in which I would have been placed with security and kindness.

And yet, as I listened, I felt... nothing.

No flutter of anticipation. No tremor of warmth.

Only clarity.

He reached for my hand across the table, intending perhaps a simple gesture of reassurance. I withdrew gently.

“Edward,” I began softly, “I like you very much. I cherish the memories we share. But I do not know that we would be well suited in marriage.”

His face paled slightly, though he did not interrupt.

“I need time,” I continued, my voice steady though my heart felt anything but. “Time to consider what I truly want. I do not believe I am prepared to marry... anyone.”

He sat back, his fork resting untouched upon his plate.

“I see,” he said after a moment. “Not prepared because...” He hesitated, studying me with quiet intelligence. “Because of Victor?”

I looked at him in surprise.

“You still love him, do you not?” His tone was gentle, not accusing. “Even after everything?”

“How do you know?” I asked, almost in wonder.

Edward gave a small, knowing smile.

“A man does not dissolve an engagement lightly,” he said calmly.

“Particularly not one so publicly arranged. He does so because his heart lies elsewhere.”

He gestured discreetly toward the society pages folded on a nearby stand.

“You deserve honesty, Norah. And so do I.”

“Edward...” I began, uncertain how to soften what could not truly be softened.

He lifted a hand gently to forestall my apology and signalled for the bill.

“I would have been honoured to marry you,” he said with quiet dignity.

“Truly. But my heart would not have been fully claimed, and yours never was. You deserve a man who looks at you as though nothing else in the room exists.”

He handed his card to the waiter without hesitation.

“Permit me, at least, to wish you courage.”

His kindness undid me.

When his hand brushed my sleeve lightly in farewell, tears sprang unexpectedly to my eyes. He immediately offered his handkerchief.

“Do not cry,” he said gently. “I am not injured beyond repair.”

He reached across the table, brushing away a stray tear with surprising tenderness.

“Go home,” he murmured. “Stop punishing yourself — and him — for loving each other.”

He paused.

“Promise me only one thing.”

I nodded, swallowing.

“Be happy.”

“I promise,” I whispered.

He inclined his head solemnly, then rose.

“Goodbye, Norah. Take care — of yourself... and of him.”

And just like that, he left.

I remained seated for some time, tears falling silently onto the white linen, gathering composure before daring to move.

It took longer than I expected to return to Victor’s apartment. I felt hollowed out — emotionally spent, stripped of pretence.

I had scarcely reached the front steps when the door opened.

He was already there.

Chapter Seventeen

Victor

I had been waiting.

That is the only honest way to describe it.

When the door finally opened and I saw her standing there — cheeks flushed from wind or tears, eyes reddened, composure barely intact — every carefully rehearsed restraint deserted me at once.

“You have been crying,” I said simply. My voice sounded rougher than intended.

In two strides I crossed the threshold and gathered her into my arms before sense could intervene.

“What has he done?”

She shook her head against my shoulder.

“He... let me go,” she said softly after a pause. “So I might be with you.”

The words landed heavily.

Edward — decent, honourable Edward — had done what I had struggled to do for years: chosen her happiness over his own.

I felt, in that moment, profoundly unworthy.

“Norah,” I murmured, gently lifting her chin so she would meet my gaze.

“Look at me.”

“Mm?”

Her eyes were tired, yes — but there was warmth there still. Something cautiously hopeful.

“You are giving me another chance,” I said quietly. “After everything. Why?”

Her answer came without hesitation.

“I hated you,” she admitted. “But I realised... I loved you too much not to.”

It was not a poetic confession.

It was better than poetry.

Honest. Unelegant. True.

Emotion tightened unexpectedly in my chest. I rested my forehead lightly against hers, closing my eyes briefly.

“I do not deserve you,” I confessed.

“Then ensure that you do,” she replied.

Not harsh. Not accusatory. Simply matter-of-fact.

A condition.

A challenge.

And — I realised — an invitation.

I drew back enough to see her clearly, committing the moment to memory.

“I shall,” I said quietly. “Every day, if necessary.”

No grand speeches. No impulsive promises. Just intention.

I pressed a light kiss to her forehead — a gesture of reassurance rather than possession — and guided her inside.

The door closed softly behind us.

For the first time in many months, the silence that followed did not feel heavy.

It felt like beginning.



And though the road ahead would demand patience, humility, and no small amount of repair, I understood one simple truth with unusual clarity:

Love, when honestly chosen, is less about grand declarations than about remaining — steadily, faithfully — when leaving would be easier.

This time, I intended to remain.